

# The 24th Infantry Regiment

# The

# “Deuce-Four”

# in Korea

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*African-Americans were not given the credit some individuals and units deserved for their service rendered in combat in Korea.*

—General Matthew B. Ridgeway<sup>1</sup>

**I**N 1950, THE PEOPLE of the United States were recovering from the suffering and hardships they had endured during World War II. They wanted to retreat into mental isolationism and to avoid the burden of world-power leadership. As a result, the country’s once proud and victorious Army was being defeated in the opening battles of the police action in Korea.

Suddenly, in July 1950, national radio announcers broadcast reports about a battle that had been fought in Yechon, a small town in Korea. The U.S. Army had won its first victory in Korea. The news jolted many Americans from their apathy. The soldiers responsible for the victory were African Americans of the “Deuce-Four,” the 24th Infantry Regiment.

“Negroes Gain First Korean Victory,” read a *New York Daily News* headline, and on 22 July 1950, CBS Radio Network news commentator H.V. Kaltenborn exulted, “Hooray for the colored troops of the 24th Infantry Regiment!” Soon Yechon became part of the Congressional Record and UN speeches.<sup>2</sup> The firefight at Yechon was not a great battle in terms of World War II notoriety, nor for death and destruction, but it came at a time of great emotional need, and it lifted the spirits of many Americans.

I was not in the invasion force that crossed the English Channel during World War II in ships with stopped-up toilets and on seas so rough that soldiers threw up on each other, the deck, their equipment,

and into the ocean. But, as a 29-year-old U.S. Army captain, I had a similar experience in a commandeered fishing trawler when my company and I crossed the Sea of Japan from Sasebo, Japan, to Pusan, Korea, in 1950. We did not go below deck because below deck lay dead fish by the thousands, amid the stench, slime, and swill. The old trawler’s toilets were so filthy that we could not use them. We performed our personal ablutions in our steel helmets, threw the contents overboard, and then lowered the helmets into the sea to clean them. Keeping cold rations down on that stinking trawler was not easy; we could not escape the overpowering odors.

In such circumstances, L Company, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division (ID), U.S. Eighth Army, arrived in Korea to fight in a war that then Army Chief of Staff General Omar N. Bradley said was “the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time and with the wrong enemy.”<sup>3</sup>

As were most American units then, black or white, the 24th Infantry Regiment was ill-equipped for combat. L Company landed without any light machineguns, 60-millimeter (mm) mortars, Browning automatic rifles, or bazooka antitank weapons, which had been standard equipment in World War II.

I located a .30-caliber machinegun, which I mounted on a Jeep. Seven of my riflemen did not have firing pins for their M-1 rifles. Ammunition was in short supply, as were boots. Six soldiers arrived wearing low-quarter dress shoes. We had known about these shortages for months, but logistics for rations was still not in place. My mess sergeant was able to get additional food only by



Regimental crest of the 24th Infantry

trading unnecessary items like heavy blankets to villagers for chickens, fruit, and vegetables.

Surprisingly, morale was still high. The 24th Infantry Regiment was the largest regiment in the U.S. occupation force in Japan and the only one to have completed 4 weeks of regimental tactical maneuvers on Mount Fuji. Unfortunately, one reason for our high morale was a serious misunderstanding of the job that lay ahead. We had been led to believe that the fighting in Korea would be over soon, that Korea would be a quick UN "police action," then just more occupation duty in a new area.

The strength and determination of the North Korean Army we would soon face were unknown to us. North Korean soldiers were hardened, seasoned, and rugged compared to U.S. troops, who were soft from easy living on sake, sukiyaki, and fraternization during the occupation of Japan. Anticipating a new round of easy occupation duty, some troops even brought musical instruments, tennis racquets, and leisure-time athletic gear. Officers brought "pinks and greens" (dress uniforms), expecting personal leave and a victory parade in Seoul, the South Korean capital.

The 24th Infantry Regiment was as segregated as the rest of the Army at the time; that is, white at the top, black in the ranks. The regimental commander, Colonel Horton V. White, was, like his name, white. His staff officers were white except for a black warrant officer, the assistant regimental adjutant. All battalion commanders and most staff officers were white. The chaplain and medical officers were black. All enlisted men were black. The regimental S1, John R. Wooldridge, was white.

Black officers in key staff positions when the regiment deployed included Captain Richard W. Williams, 1st Battalion S3; First Lieutenant Gorham Black, S1 of the 2d Battalion (after he gave up command of I Company in mid-July 1950); and Captain Nathaniel McWee, S1 of the 3d Battalion. Of the 12 lettered companies when the regiment deployed, five had black company commanders (A, D, F, I, L); all platoon leaders under them were black. Of



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seven companies commanded by white officers, all but two platoon leaders were white. E and H Companies each had one black platoon leader. Seventeen of 36 captains were black (47 percent), and 43 of 99 lieutenants (43 percent). Whites controlled key staff operations for the regiment and its battalions.

On 14 July, the 3d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Pierce, Jr., moved north to occupy Yechon, a small cotton- and textile-producing town about 120 miles north-northeast of Pusan. Here, it was thought, the U.S. force might at least slow the North Korean advance. (That month an army of

125,000 North Koreans had launched a successful offensive with superior firepower, tanks, and sheer aggressiveness, and the U.S. Army had retreated.) Holding Yechon would delay North Korean strikes against Hamchang or Andong.

Yechon was one of several key points along a network of valleys and roads leading toward Taegu in the Naktong River basin. If North Korean forces took Yechon and held it, one of the main roads south would be under their control. North Korean armor could then move south swiftly though thin U.S.-held lines, which had little artillery and only M-24 tanks to fight against the formidable Russian T-34. If U.S. troops could hold and block the road, they would deny the enemy access to the southern portion of the Korean peninsula, require him to divert his efforts either east or west to bypass Yechon, and force him to move through mountainous areas or villages with terrain that did not lend itself to mobile or tank warfare, thus slowing his advance.

Yechon, with its thatched roofs, mud buildings, dirt floor hutments, and the omnipresent smell of human feces used to fertilize fields, was a typical Korean community. Elderly Korean men walked around wearing black, stovepipe hats. Young girls in white blouses and dark skirts ran in and out of homes, and children played with sticks and mud pies. But Yechon's terrain offered special advantages. In sufficient numbers, troops occupying the high hills overlooking the roads and routes of access to the

area could easily defend Yechon.

The Hanchon River just to the east of Yechon, while not wide, was a natural barrier to attacking forces. To the north were wide fields of fire—hundreds of yards of open space to cover. On those hills, forces in a defensive position could have interlocking fields of fire and protect withdrawals or advances during a large-scale battle. The road south was a hardtop surface road that could support armored vehicles and heavy artillery.

Yechon was worth having under control. But for L Company, it would be impossible to defend. L Company's understrength platoons were as much as 800 to 900 yards apart. Defending Yechon would require at least a battalion, not an understrength rifle company. Any defensive position of this width would require artillery, AT weapons, and machineguns.

The first U.S. occupation of Yechon on 14 July 1950 was quiet and unopposed. Civilians present were mostly children, women, and a few old men. L Company was assigned to defend against entry into Yechon from the north and from the road leading in from Andong to the east. I Company, under Captain Thurston E. Jamison, occupied the high ground overlooking the town. K Company, under Lieutenant Jasper R. Johnson, was south in a support role.

We did not stay long. The North Koreans continued to press forward elsewhere, and on 18 July we withdrew to Hamchang, 27 miles south-southwest, to defend it against possible enemy attack. B Company, 65th Engineers, a force of fewer than 100 men, relieved L Company. The force knew a North Korean attack was imminent because Yechon sat astride a main road on the North Korean axis of attack into Hamchang, the major railroad junction in that part of South Korea. No doubt spies in the area told the North Koreans of the change of forces—from a rifle company to a smaller unit.

The 65th Engineers arrived on the afternoon of 18 July. That night, North Korean forces attacked, overran the engineers, and occupied Yechon. On 19 July, Captain John Zanin, the splendid 3d Battalion Operations Officer and later a colonel and win-



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ner of the Distinguished Service Cross, led a task force into town and brought out most of the engineer company safely. He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions.

The loss of Yechon was an embarrassment for U.S. soldiers and another in a string of victories for the well-trained North Korean Army. But only 3 days later, Associated Press correspondent Tom Lambert, who had accompanied L Company to Yechon, told the world about "the first sizable American ground victory in the Korean war."<sup>4</sup> Here is what happened, as I remember it.

### **The Attack on Yechon**

On 20 July, the battalion was ordered to attack Yechon and take it back from the North Koreans who had overrun the engineer company. L Company's orders were to move out as the assault company and spearhead the attack. I Company was to follow, with K Company in reserve. The heavy weapons company, M Company, with heavy machineguns mounted on jeeps, followed L Company as supporting firepower. A platoon from the 77th Engineers under Lieutenant Chester Lenon (later a winner of the Distinguished Service Cross) was detailed to L Company for support.

L Company moved north toward Yechon. Late in the afternoon of 20 July, I decided to use a tactic that would prevent the North Koreans from slowing our advance as well as keeping us from walking into any traps, which the North Koreans had surely set for us. We anticipated that the road would be mined, or the enemy would have it covered with mortar and artillery fire. My tactic was to move off the road, bypass the villages, stay out of the rice paddies, if possible, and move as far as we could before dark. As we approached the first village, I ordered Lieutenant Oliver Dillard (today a retired major general) to take his third platoon to the left around it. I led the remainder of the company toward the village, expecting to bypass it and leave whatever enemy presence was there to be mopped up by I or K Companies. I wanted to bypass all opposition and get into Yechon as quickly as possible.

When the force approached the village, a U.S. P-51 Mustang fired on it. The P-51 was on a straf-

ing mission to attack North Korean soldiers in the village 100 yards or so in front of the force. A rice paddy and a small canal separated the advance platoon and the village. After the P-51 made a few passes, and after some arm-waving on our part, it flew off. Then the force came under rifle and mortar fire from the village. I saw Dillard's platoon moving to the left of the village, and I hoped he had diverted the enemy's attention from the main assault elements, which I was leading.

Skirting the village, the group crossed a little canal and came under intense mortar fire. I heard hollow thumps as the enemy dropped rounds into mortar tubes. Looking up, I could see the mortar rounds coming down on us. They appeared to be about 60-millimeters in caliber. I ordered my two platoons and engineer units into the stinking rice paddies so any mortar rounds would land in the feces-laden mud, which would absorb some of the force of their explosions in the pudding-like soil. Later, we regrouped on the knoll on our right flank just off the Yechon road.

As night fell, we could no longer see where the enemy was. Platoons could not communicate with each other because there were no radios. I ordered disengagement and sent two runners to find Dillard's platoon and tell him to join the rest of us on the knoll where we took up pre-attack positions and set up night security. The mortar fire ceased. The North Koreans also could not see targets in the darkness and had withdrawn toward Yechon.

Dillard's platoon arrived an hour later. I positioned his platoon on the knoll and ordered Lieutenant James Smith, our supply and mess officer, to prepare a meal for the platoons as quickly as possible. While I was inspecting the platoons' positions, a runner informed me that Pierce wanted me at his command post immediately to receive another attack order.

The attack order was short and clear. On 21 July, at dawn, L Company would lead the attack on Yechon, rush through the town as quickly as possible, and reoccupy its former positions. K Company would follow and mop up. I Company would



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occupy the high ground overlooking Yechon and keep the North Koreans from attacking L Company's exposed left flank. Lieutenant James C. Cosgrove's M Company, a weapons company, would provide general support by sending crew-served weapons personnel where needed.

On 21 July, at 0400, the heat was oppressive. The air was moist and heavy, and sweating came easily. The stench of the fertilizer in the nearby rice paddies made breathing unpleasant. The men of L Company moved quickly into assault formation. They had not eaten breakfast and were hungry, hot, tired, and thirsty, but they did not touch their canteens. They knew that they would not

have any clean water to drink for hours.

Six officers and 116 enlisted men, all volunteers, all professionals in a regiment that bore the stamp of institutionalized racism, were poised, ready to attack. Racism in the Army was of little concern to the men just then. Under such circumstances, no one thinks bigger than a company, and the squad is an entire world. No one likes to fight two wars at the same time, and that was certainly true that morning near Yechon. Racism, although it was a daily annoyance, was far less important to us than the fact that a well-trained enemy had the unit in his gunsights.

We crossed the line of departure at daybreak in formation as a column of platoons. Dillard's 3d Platoon was in the lead because he had farthest to go to reach his old position. L Company followed with Lieutenant Alonzo C. Sargent's platoon behind my group of four. Then came Lieutenant Walter W. Redd's platoon, followed by Lieutenant Clifton F. Vincent's weapons platoon (really a rifle platoon since it had no crew-served weapons). Later it provided security for a 105-mm howitzer positioned to provide AT support.

We were attacking into the face of unknown enemy strength. "Going downtown with speed" was the plan, and it was our best offense. Dillard, superb officer that he was, moved his platoon so rapidly that he caught off guard whatever enemy force

was present. His platoon did not receive the enemy fire that the rest of the company did. In fact, when I later arrived at the north end of Yechon, Dillard was there waiting for my orders.

Sargent's platoon moved along the bank of the Hanchon River. Reed's platoon moved straight through the city on the double, rushing past snipers and ambush locations. All three platoons quickly occupied the same positions they had held before they had evacuated Yechon a few days earlier. Vincent's weapons platoon, the company's support element, took a position close to the town's entrance. All units were abreast to cover the area assigned to the company.

Dillard's platoon was able to move through the village without opposition because of surprise and speed. The rest of L Company, reinforced, encountered patches of sporadic resistance. (Dillard's unit had alerted the North Koreans.) After the attack, our interpreter learned from villagers that most of the town's defenders took to the hills when they saw us heading down "Main Street."

The North Koreans were caught by surprise. They thought they were under attack by a large

***[Captain Bussey] scanned the area with binoculars, and discovered a large armed force advancing toward him, clad in white farmer's clothing. Manning a .50-caliber machinegun . . . and assigning a .30-caliber machinegun to an M Company crew, Bussey fired one burst over the heads of the advancing Koreans. When they fired back, he and his crew fired both guns directly into them. The Koreans continued to advance in short rushes.***

force because the attack came at them in two prongs and looked like a large double envelopment without support, the one textbook maneuver nobody wants to get caught in tactically. Perhaps the North Koreans never heard of Cannae, but professional officers and military historians know the name well.

En route to Yechon, my driver Private First Class Richard Burke and I

picked up a wounded engineer, a member of the company that had relieved us earlier. The engineer, suffering from leg wounds, said the North Koreans hit his unit in a night attack and that the engineers did not have a chance against the superior North Korean firepower and numbers. We helped him into the Jeep, and Burke drove him to the battalion aid station. We found no other wounded, but we did find one dead soldier in some bushes near the first house we saw.

As we approached the outskirts of Yechon in my jeep, which had a scrounged .30-caliber machinegun on a pedestal riveted to the floor, we came under machinegun fire from a hut in an open field 200 yards to our left. Then we came under heavy small arms fire from snipers hidden in a large cluster of

L Company, 24th Infantry Regiment, at Camp Fuji, Gotemba, Japan, before the 25th Infantry Division's deployment to Korea. Author Biggs stands at the far left in this photo.



trees at the entrance to the city. Burke stopped the vehicle. I took a position behind the .30-caliber machinegun and laced the hut with five or six short bursts. The firing from the hut ceased. I then turned the machinegun onto the cluster of trees from which the sniper fire had come and fired another burst. Burke moved the Jeep to the left side of the road. We ran forward with Redd's platoon. We received more small arms fire from the same cluster of trees. I decided we had to move north on the double and not try to clean the enemy out of the cluster of trees. To fight through Yechon house-by-house and street-by-street would have been foolhardy. The best tactic was to rush down Main Street and drive out or bypass anything in the way.

We moved out on the double, firing at anything that fired at us. We came upon two sandbagged positions, both deserted. We did not bother to search any huts or go up any side streets. Any North Koreans there would be sandwiched between L Company on the north and K Company conducting mop-up. We had no artillery support except for three rounds dropped on the cluster of trees from which we had drawn small arms fire. Midway through the attack, tank support arrived—four M-24 light tanks, which withdrew once the town was secured.

The attack was over in less than an hour. We quickly moved into our old positions. Pierce drove up to my command post to tell me that we had done "an extremely fine job," and he extended his congratulations. But his praise rang hollow. Pierce did

not acknowledge that the victory was the result of our hastily organized battle plan, a plan which worked only because of its audacity, and without the fire support—artillery, tank, and air support—that commanders usually allocate to an infantry attack.

We were not comfortable attacking an enemy about whom we had no intelligence. We did not know the enemy's strength, his weapon emplacements or machinegun dispositions, or if he had tanks. But speed, surprise, daring, and unexpected tactics had won the day.

Although we did not know it at the time, we owed much of our success to the courage of another black officer, Captain Charles Bussey, commander of the 77th Engineers. Bussey had gone forward from Kumchon to check on his platoon assigned to L Company at Yechon. He climbed to the top of a hill, scanned the area with binoculars, and discovered a large armed force, clad in white farmer's clothing (a disguise sometimes used by North Korean soldiers) advancing toward him.

Manning a .50-caliber machinegun that he had taken from a truck and assigning a .30-caliber machinegun to an M Company crew, Bussey fired one burst over the heads of the advancing Koreans. When they fired back, he and his crew fired both guns directly into them. The Koreans continued to advance in short rushes. Enemy mortar fire killed the soldier manning the .30-caliber machinegun, but Bussey continued firing the .50-caliber machinegun until it jammed; he then manned the



.30-caliber weapon. Bussey fired for about 15 minutes. The fire proved effective. He and three other soldiers were credited with killing 258 enemy soldiers. The North Korean attack stopped after about an hour.<sup>5</sup>

Bussey's action contributed to L Company's success in Yechon by preventing a right rear flanking attack. The 25th Infantry regimental commander awarded the Silver Star to Bussey, saying it was "intended as a down payment for a Congressional Medal of Honor" which Bussey has yet to receive.<sup>6</sup>

No one in my unit received medals or Presidential citations for the retaking of Yechon, although Congressman Walter Judd of Minnesota proclaimed, "Let the world know about Yechon," and the Department of Defense Staff Report of 24 July 1950 recognized Yechon as the first U.S. victory in Korea.<sup>7</sup>

The victory occurred in a war that had gone badly from the beginning and at a time when scapegoating was becoming a national pastime. The victory showed that the officers and men of the 24th Infantry Regiment were professionals with high morale, considerable courage, and the ability to improvise and tailor tactics to suit a mission. All of a sudden on a clear July morning, a black American unit had charged at the North Koreans at Yechon. The force was more than the North Koreans expected, and they retreated into the hills and back down the same road they had come in on a few days earlier.

## The Battle in Washington

In Washington, D.C., it was a different story. There, one could easily believe that the American people, tired of war, had allowed the U.S. Army to become impotent and that the military's inner circle of power had fallen apart. A shortsighted military hierarchy had gone back to sleep after World War II and the combat readiness of U.S. forces was at a substandard level.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff could not control Gen-



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eral Douglas MacArthur. President Harry S. Truman made disparaging remarks about flag officers in general and about the Navy's top brass in particular. Maybe Truman was justified in his assessment.

When Bradley testified in hearings before the House Armed Services Committee in Washington in October 1949, after Admiral Louis Denfeld had complained about morale in the Navy, Bradley said, "Senior officers decrying the low morale of their forces evidently do not realize that the esprit of the men is but a mirror of their confidence in their leadership."<sup>8</sup> Secretary of

State George C. Marshall agreed: "When a general complains of the morale of his troops, the time has come to look into his own."<sup>9</sup>

American attitudes contributed to the pathetic state of the military. As Lieutenant General James Doolittle said, "You must remember . . . , we thought World War II was a war to end all wars. The public was fed up with the military, fed up with war, fed up with discipline. . . . Enlisted men didn't salute officers away from a military post, and it was difficult to make them do so. One of our recommendations was that saluting would be obligatory on post and off post. This brought a great deal of criticism. . . . [Y]ou couldn't enforce the rule in the light of public reaction to the military and to war at that time."<sup>10</sup>

The Army's leaders did not lobby for the needs of the service. Training was inadequate, and equipment was in short supply. Equipment on hand was in poor to antiquated condition, much of it left over from World War II. Weapons were inoperable because of a lack of spare parts. Crew-served weapons, barrels, and tubes were worn out and unusable. Even combat boots, ponchos, and clothing were lacking and always "on requisition." Combat readiness reports were inaccurate. Those who wrote them often deliberately presented a false picture of unit readiness. (I recall arguing with the 3d Battalion, 24th Infantry, staff that I was not even 60 per-

cent ready for combat, was below Tables of Organization and Equipment levels, and suffering from acute equipment problems.)

Six months after World War II had ended, the Army was almost wiped out. The 1945-1950 U.S. Army was in a deplorable condition. The Navy almost ceased to exist. The Army Air Corps fared a little better because the Army Air Corps' glamour boys had charisma and could obtain money from Congress. The Navy received funding only after "the revolt of the Admirals in 1948." Army generals with little concern for the future were still in power. Popular and battlewise, they were in a position to have fought for what the Army needed, but they did not do so. Later, General James M. Gavin said, "Our generation of generals let the Army down badly."<sup>11</sup>

Bradley was more devastatingly critical: "Ike had left me an administrative rather than a military force. Half of the 552,000 officers and men were overseas on occupation duty, serving as policemen or clerks. The other half was in the States performing various administrative chores. In theory, there was an 'Army Reserve' in the United States for emergencies. On paper, it consisted of two and a third divisions. But in truth, only one division—the 82d Airborne at Fort Bragg, North Carolina—could be remotely described as combat ready. The Army was in no position whatsoever to backstop a get-tough policy of containment vis-à-vis the Soviets. Actually, the Army of 1948 could not fight its way out of a paper bag."<sup>12</sup>

Truman appointed Louis Johnson as Secretary of Defense. Johnson, Truman's former chief political fundraiser, lacked experience in the military and in the government. Because of his lack of experience, he "Johnsonized" the Army to a point where it was impotent. On the other hand, MacArthur sought to make the Army look better than it was. These individuals had a penchant for talking about Army power but avoiding discussing how poorly the Army was equipped. MacArthur and others, an arrogant,



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elitist group who could see no farther than the end of the budget year, were paternalistic and patronizing.

Korea had been virtually written off. In Bradley's assessment, "We occupied Korea but we did not want to stay any longer than we had to. As a military operations zone, Korea—mountainous and bitterly cold in winter—had no appeal. In the very remote event we would be compelled to launch military operations on the Asiatic mainland, Korea would certainly be bypassed. Should the Soviets occupy South Korea and threaten Japan, it was believed we could destroy

her military bases with air power. . . . U.S. policy toward South Korea was to get out as soon as possible. . . . I agreed entirely with this policy."<sup>13</sup>

If the best course of action was to get out "as soon as possible," then two million people lost their lives in a war that need not have happened and cost the United States dearly in terms of prestige and economic resources.

Poisoning already foul waters, U.S. military leaders failed to move aggressively (as the Constitution required them to) to strengthen the Army through integration. They resisted integration in defiance of Presidential orders. Bradley said, "I was not a racist, nor did I accept the slander that 'Negroes could not fight.' [W]hen we had been compelled to utilize black service troops for emergency individual reinforcements, I had seen them fight as well as white men. But if I had encouraged Truman to create 'instant integration' in the U.S. Army in 1948, I believe it would have utterly destroyed what little Army we had. We would also have lost the support of the many senior Southerners in Congress who held important positions on the Armed Services and Appropriations committees. . . . Behind the scenes, we in the Army did our utmost to discourage 'instant integration' of the Armed Forces and were, to a certain extent, successful. When Truman finally issued the executive order on July 27, 1948, it was much watered down."<sup>14</sup> In fact, the order never used the word "integration."

Bradley attempted to tie Army personnel issues to civilian community race relations. Apparently, he did not see any difference between a structured military organization with its command and control authority to enforce regulations and the freewheeling, racist civilian society. For an officer of Bradley's experience, this failure of perception was inexcusable. Eisenhower, too, did not exert himself to fight racism on the weak grounds that he was only "implementing Army policy, not making it."<sup>15</sup> Ironically, he had used the best of all reasons for integrating soldiers under his command only a few years earlier: during the Battle of the Bulge, he needed to use any man able to fight.<sup>16</sup>

In this quiet, behind-the-scenes, anti-integration rebellion, Bradley and others bowed before their Southern political masters because they feared what would happen to their budgets. This conduct was all the more repugnant because they chose a political course of action that violated their oaths of office. They should have at least tried to carry out the President's policy while they were wearing the uniform.

In the racist U.S. society of 1950, the 24th Infantry Regiment was also the victim of segregationist thinking. Authors who wrote unfairly about the 24th Infantry Regiment were on a feeding frenzy like a monkey that eats only bananas, and the 24th Infantry Regiment, they thought, tasted like bananas. The 24th Infantry Regiment bore the brunt of this—more so than any other unit.

In July 1950, ill-equipped, ill-prepared, white U.S. troops reeled from and fled an armor-heavy North Korean onslaught. Near Hadong, North Korean forces routed the 3d Battalion of the U.S. 19th Infantry Regiment. This white battalion's poor performance, however, never received the kind of adverse publicity the black 24th Infantry Regiment received when its black soldiers performed poorly. When



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discipline broke in the 3d Battalion, many men panicked and "bugged out" for the rear, throwing away Browning automatic rifles, machineguns, ammunition, M-1 rifles, carbines, helmets, boots, and even shirts as they tried to cross a stream which turned out to be 20 feet deep. North Korean troops killed American soldiers by the score. One soldier who survived described what happened: "They hunted us down like they were shooting rabbits fleeing a brush fire."<sup>17</sup>

When the North Korean 4th Infantry Division attacked white 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry, soldiers, the white unit fled the battlefield, leaving behind heavy

weapons, rifles, carbines, and ammunition on its retreat south to Chonan. According to author Joseph C. Goulden, one badly wounded soldier asked an officer, "Lieutenant, what is going to happen to me?" The lieutenant passed him a hand grenade. "This is the best I can do for you," he said.<sup>18</sup> Abandoning the wounded on the battlefield is a violation of U.S. military doctrine, and this incident is a damning indictment of the unit's morale and discipline.

The euphoria over victory at Yechon was short-lived. As the North Koreans pushed on elsewhere, the 24th Infantry Regiment was withdrawn from Yechon in a realignment of forces. Communist divisions continued to advance, forcing U.S., Republic of Korea, and newly arrived UN forces into a small pocket of southeast Korea called the Pusan Perimeter. In the months that followed, the 24th Infantry Regiment shared in the defense of the Perimeter, the advance to the north, the tragic fighting retreat from a Chinese trap in December 1950, and the battles that ended in a stalemate and truce at the 38th Parallel. During this time, the 24th Infantry Regiment had its share of combat successes and failures. White troops had a similar record.

On 1 October 1951, the 24th Infantry Regiment was erased. "Deactivated" was the official word,

but deactivated under a racist cloud of "poor performance." Its members were scattered to other units throughout the Eighth Army. True, this was a step toward ending long-standing segregation of the races in the U.S. military, but the immediate motivating factor was at least in part the white racist attitude that the 24th Infantry Regiment had not performed well because it was a black regiment.<sup>19</sup>

Both black and white units in Korea were not without failures, and some units performed poorly at times. Some black units did break. And why not? They were put in untenable positions. The racism of white officers did nothing to bolster their morale. Black soldiers were overrun by superior North Korean forces, served under inexperienced white commanders, saw their ammunition fall short, and watched as friendly South Korean forces on their flanks run away from the fight.

White racists in and out of the military denigrated the performance of blacks in Korea. For example, they liked to cite the "bug out" song attributed to the 24th Infantry, "When the Chinese mortars begins to thug, the old Deuce-Four begins to bug [take off]." There was a bug-out song, but, in actuality, it was just another type of black "blues" song. Whites ignored the fact that blacks have long made humor of misery and failure. This joking attitude was misread and misinterpreted as cowardice.



***The Army's leaders did not lobby for the needs of the service. Training was inadequate, and equipment was in short supply. Equipment on hand was in poor to antiquated condition, much of it left over from World War II. Combat readiness reports were inaccurate. Those who wrote them often deliberately presented a false picture of unit readiness.***

In such an atmosphere, on 1 October 1951, the black 24th Infantry Regiment, whose 3d Battalion had scored the first U.S. victory in Korea, was erased. The deactivation order dated 22 September 1951, specified that "personnel will not be reduced in grade as a result of the action directed herein."<sup>20</sup> Still, a cloud of racist innuendoes and allegations of poor performance hung over the entire affair.

American history has long told us that the black soldier, when properly led, properly equipped, and properly trained, performs admirably under all circumstances. Considering

all the conditions that the 24th Infantry Regiment faced in Korea in 1950, there was absolutely no reason to make the unit a scapegoat for the Army's failures. Many blacks in the Deuce-Four performed heroically at Yechon and elsewhere in Korea, and many are undisputable heroes.

The 24th Infantry Regiment deserves to be remembered as the unit that brought into focus the enormous price in blood and treasure the United States paid for its national and military indulgence in racism. With unmistakable clarity, the 24th Infantry Regiment exposed the folly of military and civilian leaders who prolonged the absurdity of a segregated army. In this way, the men of the 24th Infantry Regiment hastened integration. Above all else, this is the Deuce-Four's legacy. **MR**

### NOTES

1. Matthew B. Ridgeway, address given at West Point, NY in 1990, quoted in Bradley Biggs, "Were Blacks Scapegoats for Our Failures in Korea?" (Unpublished article, 1993).
2. William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996), 93; Bradley Biggs, personal notes and memorabilia; Barton Biggs, audio collection.
3. Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1989), 397.
4. *Ibid.*, 153.
5. Charles M. Bussey, *Firefight at Yechon: Courage and Racism in the Korean War* (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1991).
6. Blair, 152-53.
7. Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, 93; Department of Defense Staff Report, 24 July 1950, furnished to Bradley Biggs in 1996 by David L. Carlisle, former First Lieutenant, 77th Engineer Company, 25th Infantry Division.
8. Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 619.
9. *Ibid.*
10. U.S. War Department, Board of Officer-Enlisted Men Relationships Study, 27

11. James Gavin, interview by Bradley Biggs, Spring 1979.
12. Bradley and Blair, 474.
13. *Ibid.*, 476.
14. *Ibid.*, 485. The text of the executive order states: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Services, without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible [with] due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale."
15. Joseph E. Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1988), 199.
16. Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 293-94.
17. Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books, 1982).
18. *Ibid.*, 123.
19. Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, 261.
20. Eighth U.S. Army, Korea, General Order 717, Inactivation of Unit, 22 September 1951, cited and discussed in Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, 261-62.